DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 471 699 UD 035 455

TITLE	Staying on Course. Standards-Based Reform in America's Schools: Progress and Prospects.
INSTITUTION	Achieve, Inc., Washington, DC.
PUB DATE	2002-11-00
NOTE	25p.
AVAILABLE FROM	Achieve, Inc., 400 North Capitol Street, N.W., Suite 351, Washington, DC 20001. Tel: 202-624-1460; Fax: 202-624-1468; Web site: http://www.achieve.org.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; *Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Standardized Tests; State Government; *State Standards
IDENTIFIERS	*Reform Efforts

ABSTRACT

This report displays how far the states have come in ensuring that students receive a quality education, discussing how much farther they need to go. Historically, expectations and achievement have varied from community to community. In response, states have responded by working to set standards for all students. Many have created tests to measure achievement against those standards and have begun to hold schools and students accountable for results. Six trends stand out in state progress in recent years: the focus of the national conversation on school improvement has shifted to what students actually achieve, not seat time; as nearly every state has adopted standards in core academic subjects, the quality of standards generally has risen; as the number of state tests grows, fewer tests can be called minimum competency and more are scored in relation to standards rather than national averages; the push for higher standards has not resulted in a common definition for proficiency areas across the states; more than ever before, states and schools that fall behind do not escape public scrutiny, and they face a continuing challenge in actually helping these students and schools, not simply identifying them; and while teachers generally have supported the push for higher standards, that support is beginning to waiver. (SM)

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Staying on Course

Standards-Based Reform in America's Schools: Progress and Prospects

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Achieve is an independent, bipartisan, nonprofit organization created by governors and corporate leaders to help states and the private sector raise standards and performance in America's schools. Founded at the 1996 National Education Summit, Achieve has sponsored two additional Summits in 1999 and 2001.

Achieve helps states raise academic standards, measure performance against those standards, establish clear accountability for results and strengthen public confidence in our education system. To do this, it:

- helps states benchmark their standards, assessments and accountability systems against the best in the country and the world;
- provides sustained public leadership and advocacy for the movement to raise standards and improve student performance;
- builds partnerships that allow states to work together to improve teaching and learning and raise student achievement; and
- serves as a national clearinghouse on education standards and school reform.

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Message from the Chairmen

The governors and business executives who gathered at the 1996 National Education Summit sought to create an independent, nongovernmental entity to help states in the hard work of raising academic achievement and improving their schools. As its fifth year of work comes to a close, Achieve, Inc., has lived up to its promise. Achieve has proven the value of expert, outside advice and has been an unwavering but practical voice for quality.

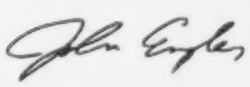
As a nation, we have committed to raising standards, measuring results, and holding adults and students accountable for them as our best hope to improve the achievement of our children and the performance of our schools. And the mission of Achieve is no less vital to our democratic and economic future today than it was five years ago.

Achieve was created to help states, because states should and must take the lead in improving schools. While federal actions certainly could add momentum to their work, it remains the task of states to ensure that their students receive a world-class education.

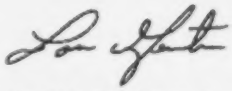
This report shows us how far the states have come. More importantly, it lays out how much further they need to go. Our successes continue to be piecemeal. In the states that have made the most progress with their standards, tests and accountability systems, the results give us all hope and cause to push ahead. But no state can claim to have achieved what the governors, business executives and educators gathered at the most recent Education Summit in 2001 called the two irreducible minimums — raising the academic bar for all students and closing the achievement gap between our most successful and least successful students.

In the last year, Achieve has solidified its role as an important resource for states interested in implementing the highest-quality standards, tests and accountability policies. Achieve continues to benchmark state standards against one another. The Mathematics Achievement Partnership continues to provide an important example of multistate cooperation in revitalizing teaching and testing, moving ahead with state-of-the-art professional development, and establishing a common test based on rigorous standards. Working with five states and three other education organizations in the American Diploma Project, Achieve is identifying and closing the gaps between high school exit expectations and the academic demands of college.

As we reflect on the period since the 1996 Summit, we are encouraged by what states have accomplished in a relatively short period of time. But it would be a mistake to assume that schools will inevitably improve and that students will benefit as a result. States face imposing hurdles and we all are left with tough choices. The nation continues to need committed governors and business executives to provide the courageous leadership that will drive standards-based reform from state houses to schoolhouses. As we end our tenure as co-chairs of Achieve, we are delighted that new leaders — governors and business executives — will lead Achieve and our schools forward. Our children deserve nothing less.



John Engler
Governor, State of Michigan



Louis V. Gerstner, Jr.
Chairman, IBM Corporation

Tearing Down a Facade

When it comes to schooling, so much of the American experience seems shared. The school year takes about 180 days nearly everywhere. Most teachers face classrooms filled with about 25 students, give or take a child or two. Course names such as Algebra I and Social Studies sound the same in every school district. Desks line up in even rows, school buses are yellow, lunchrooms serve tater tots. This is what the 19th-century reformers who championed public school systems had in mind.

But these common trappings of schools have served as a facade, hiding what historically have been wildly different expectations about the academic achievement of children in different schools. Expectations have varied from community to community and, not surprisingly, so has achievement. Students from poorer communities and disadvantaged backgrounds consistently have ended up with less when it comes to both expectations and achievement.

"Expectations have varied from community to community and, not surprisingly, so has achievement."

The good news is the facade is beginning to be torn down. One by one, states have worked over the last decade to set standards for all students. Many have created tests to measure achievement against those standards and have begun to hold schools and students accountable for results. While more undoubtedly remains to be done, much has occurred over the last five years.

As the list of states adopting this goal of common expectations has steadily grown, what amounts to a de facto national strategy for school improvement has emerged resting squarely on states' standards. This shift was reinforced by the passage last year of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which aims to add new momentum to states' efforts to raise achievement across the board while closing the gap for those students historically left furthest behind.

Achieve, Inc., was created by governors and concerned business leaders to help states raise academic standards and improve school performance. Part of the organization's charge is to keep track of the progress that has been made.

This report explores what states and, by extension, the nation have accomplished in the last five years and identifies challenges that could slow — or derail — the push to improve schools and boost student achievement.

Six trends stand out in the progress Achieve has seen in the last five years and in the prospects for standards-based reform in the years ahead.

First, the national conversation on school improvement has shifted in an important way. The focus now clearly is on what students actually achieve. Discussions about the elements of schooling — class sizes, teacher certification and the like — all are viewed through this achievement lens.

Second, as nearly every state has adopted standards in core academic subjects, the quality of standards generally has risen. However, most states still have work to do to make their standards clearer and more challenging.

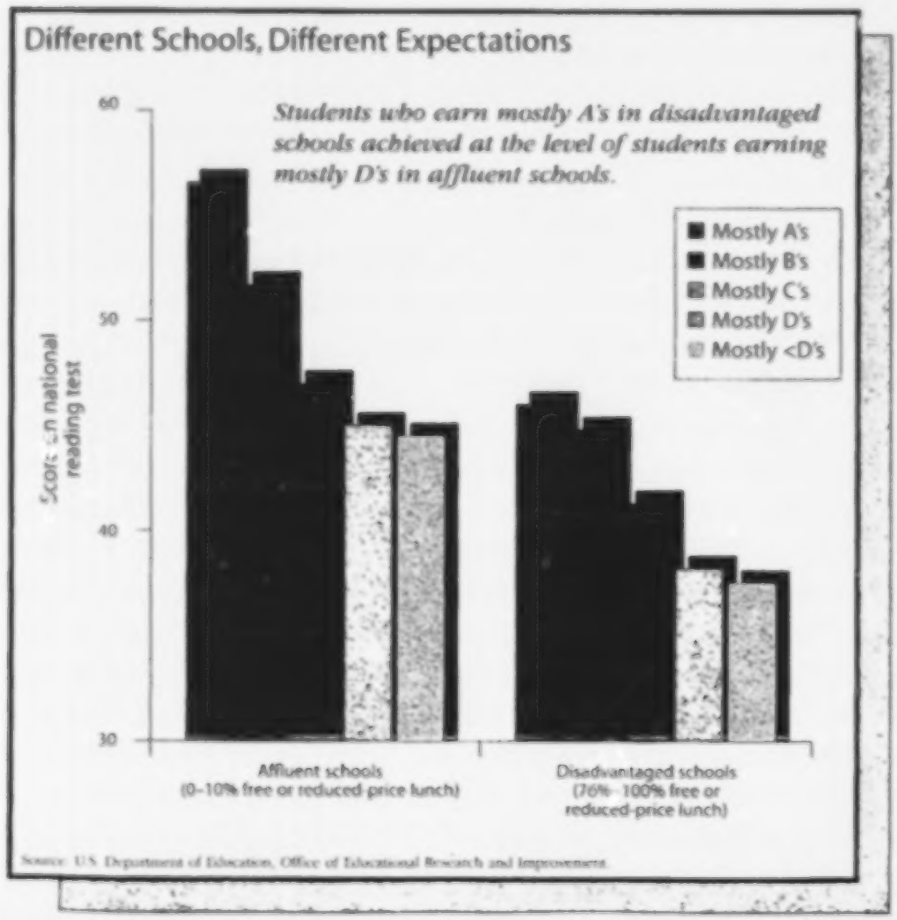
Third, states must take care to ensure the quality of the tests they give as the number of those tests grows to unprecedented levels. Fewer tests can be called "minimum competency" and more are scored in relation to standards rather than "national averages," but few state assessment systems fully meet the needs of teachers, parents and students.

Fourth, the push for higher standards has not resulted in a common definition for proficiency across the states. States have set this bar without fully contemplating what graduates will face when they enter colleges or high-skills, high-growth workplaces.

Fifth, more than ever before, students and schools that fall behind do not escape public scrutiny. But states and school districts face a continuing, significant challenge in actually helping these students and schools, and not simply identifying them.

Sixth, while teachers generally have supported the push for higher standards, that support is beginning to waver. In the view of many teachers, states' efforts to set standards and measure results are running too far ahead of work to give teachers the curriculum they need and the professional development to use it.

Different Schools, Different Expectations


Students who earn mostly A's in disadvantaged schools achieved at the level of students earning mostly D's in affluent schools.
Mostly A's
Mostly B's
Mostly C's
Mostly D's
Mostly <D's
Score on national reading test
60
50
40
30
Affluent schools (0–10% free or reduced-price lunch)
Disadvantaged schools (76%–100% free or reduced-price lunch)

Source: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

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Achievement, Not Seat Time

Forty-nine states have adopted academic standards in the four core subjects — English, math, science and history/social studies. When governors and business leaders gathered at the 1996 National Education Summit, that number was 14. The transformation speaks of rapid acceptance, diligence and hard work. But the numbers can obscure the most significant implication of states' speedy efforts to put standards in place.

Simply stated, there has been a fundamental change in the national conversation about what students and schools must do to succeed. Consider a typical response two decades ago to the landmark report *A Nation At Risk* — increasing the recommended number of courses students should take. Although prescribing heavier course loads seemed bold at the time, American students still trail academically in international comparisons. Today, the emphasis is on achievement, not "seat time"; on end results, not inputs. About half the states now require students to demonstrate what they have learned on a test before they receive a diploma or move to the next grade, according to *Education Week*. More than half the states identify and aid schools that are low performing, and all states now will be required to under the new federal law. At the other end of the spectrum, more than a third of the states now reward schools for high performance. In evaluating everything from the programs schools use to the policies states and local districts set, the focus has shifted in an important way. The criterion for success is whether students learn what they need to succeed — whether they meet standards.

Because the move to adopt standards was so swift and nearly complete, the assumption may be that standards represented some sort of natural evolution for American schooling. While public schools have aspired since the 19th century to Horace Mann's ideal of the common school, they have been far more susceptible to the mindset of the bell-shaped curve. Schools have been more successful at sorting children than at educating all of them well. The notion that all children should be held to the same standards, and that the standards should be rigorous as well, is more revolutionary than evolutionary. The fact that the notion is so widely held now does not diminish that.

When governors and business leaders from nearly every state met in 1996 for a National Education Summit, the idea of standards was not new. But it had not gained sufficient traction to sustain meaningful reform. Within states, some leaders questioned the need for common, high standards and opposed state-mandated tests to measure them. Federally sponsored attempts to craft national standards had fallen apart amid partisan fights. The Summit moved the conversation about standards away from Washington altogether and into states, and marked the first time governors and business leaders had committed in a public, personal and bipartisan way to building systems of standards, tests and accountability in every state.

"Today, the emphasis is on achievement, not 'seat time'; on end results, not inputs."

Clearer, Higher Targets

The progress on standards is not limited to the growing number of states that have adopted them. Over the past five years, the standards themselves generally have improved.

When states first began setting their standards, it was largely a solitary exercise. The process in most states placed a premium on consensus within their borders, an admirable attempt to ensure that whatever standards were adopted would be widely accepted. But educators, parents and other residents of one state had virtually no way to compare the standards where they lived with those of neighboring states, or to standards generally accepted to be the best examples. The result: The standards looked very different from state to state in both form and substance.

The American Federation of Teachers began to shift that pattern in 1995, issuing what has become an annual 50-state report on the quality of states' standards. The initial report hit hardest on the lack of clarity in most standards. During the last five years, both the Council for Basic Education and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation have published their own ratings of standards as well.

Achieve's contribution has been to provide an objective evaluation of standards and tests at a state's request. This benchmarking mission was one of the principal reasons governors and business leaders created the organization. Over the last five years, Achieve has given more than a quarter of the states detailed appraisals of how their standards stack up against the highest-quality examples from this country and abroad and specific advice on how to improve them.

The impact of all these comparisons is clear — states have been given the motivation and the means to improve their standards. In some states, the standards have become

Indiana: Comprehensive Approach

When it got the results from an Achieve benchmarking study, Indiana responded quickly and comprehensively.

The state's new standards rank among the best nationally in terms of clarity, rigor and specificity by grade. This is a far cry from 1999, when Achieve criticized Indiana's standards for lacking important content and for underestimating student capabilities. One example of the improvement: Fifth graders now are asked to write algebraic equations, a standard previously pegged to 7th grade.

The Governor's Education Roundtable — a unique group co-chaired by Indiana's governor and state superintendent — pushed forward the standards rewrite, which involved parents, teachers, school superintendents, higher education officials and the state board of education. The revisions were adopted in 2000 with an aggressive time line for changing the state's tests to measure the new standards. Exam developers for grades 3, 6 and 8 were given two years to align the tests to the revised standards. In 2004, the class of 2007 will take an improved graduation exam.

To help standards penetrate the classroom, Indiana carved a new state role in curriculum development. The state created grade-by-grade curriculum frameworks aligned directly to K–8 standards and some high school courses. The frameworks give schools and teachers better guidance on how to teach the skills and knowledge demanded by standards.

Educators have a new incentive to use the frameworks. School performance will be rated by five categories beginning in 2004 — exemplary progress, commendable progress, academic progress, priority academic watch and high priority academic watch. Lawmakers gave the state permission to take over the worst-performing schools.

The biggest challenge Indiana's revamped accountability system faces is the shrinking state budget. The loss of funding, coupled with new demands from the federal government to test reading and math every year, has caused Indiana to postpone science and social studies tests.

more clear and measurable. In some states, they have become more specific and precise. In a few states, they have become significantly more challenging. What were considered the best state standards when the 1996 Summit was held would today be considered average. When states' standards were subject to comparison, some states sought to measure up and the quality bar inched up.

The most powerful evidence of improved standards comes from some of the states with which Achieve has worked. Indiana, New Jersey, Ohio, Oklahoma and Oregon each made a serious effort to respond to Achieve's analyses, and their standards have improved substantially as a result. Standards in Indiana and Oregon now are among the strongest in the nation.

These states show that states do not have to be stuck with their existing standards, even if substantial work went into creating them originally and winning acceptance of them by educators and the public. This is vital because, despite improvements some states have made, common flaws in many states' standards persist. Some states' standards remain too broad or vague to guide teachers in building their lessons. More disturbingly, they remain less rigorous than the expectations routinely set for students in the highest-performing nations. Too often, volume has been confused for rigor. In some cases, states have added concepts and skills to try to "cover" everything, without making the tough choices about what is most important for students to learn. In other cases, standards are repeated grade after grade with no signal of the progression of knowledge and skills that should mark students' academic growth. To remain at the center of school improvement, particularly in the minds of parents and the public, standards need to be focused on essential content, written in plain English and illustrated with examples of student work.

The ability of states to improve their standards over time will become even more critical under the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The law is premised on the idea that state education systems should align closely from top to bottom with standards. And it attaches significant stakes to meeting these standards. Moving forward with this would be disastrous if the standards were lacking.

Ohio: Quick Turnaround

Until recently, Ohio's standards had been implied. Teachers had to rely on vague, 17-year-old guidelines. The only other way to determine what students were expected to learn was to search for clues in the statewide proficiency test.

But in a matter of 18 months, Ohio approved a comprehensive set of curriculum standards that outlined exactly what students should know in English and math by the end of each grade. In 2001, the governor and general assembly approved the standards and replaced an existing proficiency test in favor of standards-based achievement exams. The state is working to ensure the new tests, which will be in place in 2003–2004, more closely align with the new standards.

Ohio was the first state to ask Achieve for a comprehensive review of its education reform policies. Among its recommendations, the 1999 report urged the state to revamp its standards and tests. Lawmakers got an extra incentive to move swiftly from a court order requiring the state to come up with a "comprehensive, clear set of standards that will inform parents, students, teachers, principals, superintendents, board members and the citizens of Ohio what we as a state expect our students to know and be able to do."

While his predecessor asked for Achieve's policy review, Governor Bob Taft committed to seeing through the recommendations. He established a Governor's Commission on Student Success — a panel of educators, legislators and CEOs — that recommended the state overhaul its standards and tests. Ohio did that for English and math and currently is revising science and social studies standards. The revised English and math standards fall in the upper ranks nationally, Achieve has found.

Putting Quality before Quantity

The push by states to set standards has created an environment that stresses achievement and requires accurate measurement. As a consequence, the quantity of state tests has grown over the last five years. Forty-eight states now give statewide tests, up from 39 at the 1996 Summit. In roughly the same time frame, states' annual spending on testing has more than doubled to more than $420 million. While spending on testing continues to account for a tiny percentage of total education spending directed at ensuring the rest of the money is used effectively, the amount is not insignificant. At a time of economic uncertainty, the nation can ill afford to test for the sake of testing; tests need to serve school improvement by providing useful information that can point to individual students' strengths and weaknesses, identify practices that work, and target resources where they are needed most.

The tests many states give are far removed from the generation of minimum-competency exams put in place two decades ago. They are designed to measure each student's achievement of specific standards, not just how they compare with other students or with a "national average." Because these standards are public, teachers and parents can work with children to help improve their performance. Most tests today also are more challenging than in the past. Many are designed to measure advanced as well as basic skills. States also are more likely than ever before to use a mix of formats on their tests, although most remain predominantly multiple choice.

Despite signs of improvement, few state assessment systems fully meet the needs of teachers, students, parents and accountability systems. Too often, Achieve's work has uncovered state tests that fail to measure the depth and breadth of standards. It is only fair that tests measure only what can be found in standards. But the converse is true as well; what is in the standards — all the standards — should be assessed. On one reading test Achieve reviewed, almost half the questions measured a single standard, leaving other important standards underemphasized. Achieve has found what is most likely to be omitted is the most complex knowledge and skills, leaving tests unbalanced. Algebra and probability may be in many states' middle-grades standards, but most questions on state tests deal instead with computation, whole-number operations and fractions. This poses a difficult question: Are states really encouraging teachers and students to aim for a higher target?

The fact that tests can drive everyday teaching and learning is in itself not dangerous. The peril comes because it is easier to test the simplest knowledge and skills described in standards, leaving complex concepts and extended reasoning underrepresented. But the best tests show us the possibilities.

The most robust tests measure a rich array of content so that they can challenge students at the highest and lowest levels of achievement. Tests in states such as Massachusetts, Michigan and New Jersey stand out because they are demanding of students in ways that encourage stimulating instruction, rather than promoting "drill-and-kill" teaching. It is difficult to imagine, for example, how

rote instruction could help a student answer this recent Massachusetts 10th-grade exam question: Describe why a supporting character in a favorite novel was essential to the plot.

In English, the best tests ask students to make inferences or to interpret literary symbols, rather than simply to choose an answer that mirrors the language of a reading passage. In math, they demand that students solve a problem or interpret data, then explain their answers, rather than simply applying a routine operation that has been memorized. This sort of question demands not only correct calculation, but also probes students' understanding of the concepts underlying those operations. The exams usually include well-constructed, open-ended items to get at this deeper knowledge, but also make use of strong multiple-choice items.

Now, the United States is embarking on what is likely to be the most intense period of test development in history. The provision of No Child Left Behind requiring annual, grade-by-grade testing in 3rd through 8th grade will cause at least 36 states to add more than 200 tests to their assessment systems. These new tests could be a significant help to school districts, educators and parents. They could offer more regular checks of students' progress, allowing teachers and parents to act more quickly if some children are falling behind. And they could help bring greater coherence to the education system by articulating grade by grade what students need to learn to be successful.

But these benefits are by no means assured simply because states will add tests. The quality of the tests given is at least as important as the quantity. If the goal simply is to give a test in each grade, it can be satisfied easily. But the aim must be higher if the tests are to drive change.

Take the alignment of tests to standards. This is, of course, a precondition of effective standards-based reform; teachers and students must have confidence that if they focus on reaching standards, children will perform well on state tests. This part of the bargain between states and their teachers and students creates problems for states continuing to use off-the-shelf, norm-referenced tests. Achieve has consistently found that these tests do not measure the content of the standards well. This creates the potential for a mixed

Oregon: Standards First

Oregon has taken to heart the premise that school improvement starts with high-quality standards.

Oregon was among the first states to ask Achieve to benchmark standards in 2000. After focusing on Achieve's recommendations, the new standards in English and math are considerably clearer and more rigorous. To ensure standards make it through the classroom door, Oregon also has worked to align its teacher preparation programs with standards for students.

Educators from the state department of education to local campuses attribute recent improvements in test results to these efforts. For example, 75 percent of 5th graders reached the reading, writing, math and science standards. Some of the biggest gains were made in some of Portland's poorest neighborhoods. Teachers in those schools said the improved scores were the result of using test data to pinpoint weak spots in the curriculum and change instruction.

Budget concerns have hit the state's education reforms hard this year. After lawmakers slashed $4.5 million from the testing program, Oregon suspended testing in writing, math problem-solving and science in grades 3, 5 and 8, but they hope to restore the exams in the 2003–2004 school year.

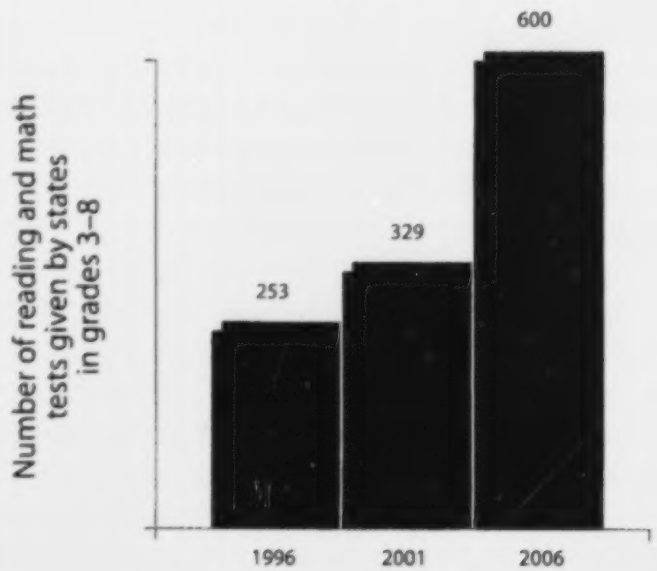
The decision to delay tests will cause Oregon to alter slightly a stronger school accountability system adopted this year. School ratings initially will rely only on reading and math tests, but nonetheless will demand higher performance from schools.

message to schools about standards as the focal point of the education system. These concerns will grow if many states turn to off-the-shelf options in filling the gaps in their grade-by-grade tests to comply with No Child Left Behind. If states use a hodge-podge of tests from grade to grade, with differing degrees of connection to standards, the results will lack the consistency across grades to improve teaching and learning.

As states add tests to satisfy No Child Left Behind, it may call into question the fragmentary nature of this work across the nation. States are overly proprietary when it comes to their tests and standards. This may, in part, be a reaction to earlier federal initiatives around standards and tests. But the new federal law makes clear that states control these decisions. With this in mind, states should not confuse local control with local labor. Given the number of tests to be built, it can only serve the interests of their citizens for states to pool intellectual and financial capital. This could mean working together to create new, higher-quality tests, as the states in Achieve's Mathematics Achievement Partnership are doing, or it could mean finding new ways to share existing tests. In addition to saving money, this approach would have the potential benefit of offering new comparative information to states. In the end, states would be drawing on the same handful of companies that publish and score tests; it makes sense for states to empower themselves by joining together.

Growing Number of Tests

The number of reading and math tests states give in grades 3 through 8 has grown steadily over the last five years, but still falls well short of the tests that must be given by 2006 under the No Child Left Behind Act.



Sources: Achieve, *Education Week*

The Missing Anchor for Proficiency

One thing that has become apparent as states have built their testing and accountability systems is challenging standards for what students should know and be able to do — content standards — alone are not enough. Whether it is high-stakes decisions for students or for schools, in the end it is performance on assessments that counts; this is a reason tests must be of the highest quality. But states also face a difficult decision in determining how well students need to perform on those tests to "pass" or be deemed "proficient." Where a state ultimately sets this bar determines how much that state really is asking of its students and schools.

As with the initial standards setting, the conversation to define specific expectations for proficiency has gone on within each state — with far fewer voices at the table in most cases and just as little consideration of comparative information. As a result, the percentage of students deemed proficient varies considerably from state to state — from fewer than 20 percent of students reaching the mark to more than 90 percent, depending on the state. This gap is far more pronounced than what can be seen in results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the only widely used yardstick of student performance.

With its call for states to ensure that all students are "proficient" by 2013, the No Child Left Behind Act has shifted dramatically the context of states' expectations for how well students perform. What have been in-state conversations now are fundamental to what will be a national appraisal of states' success; the decision on where to set the bar may be the single most important factor determining how states fare in the new federal model.

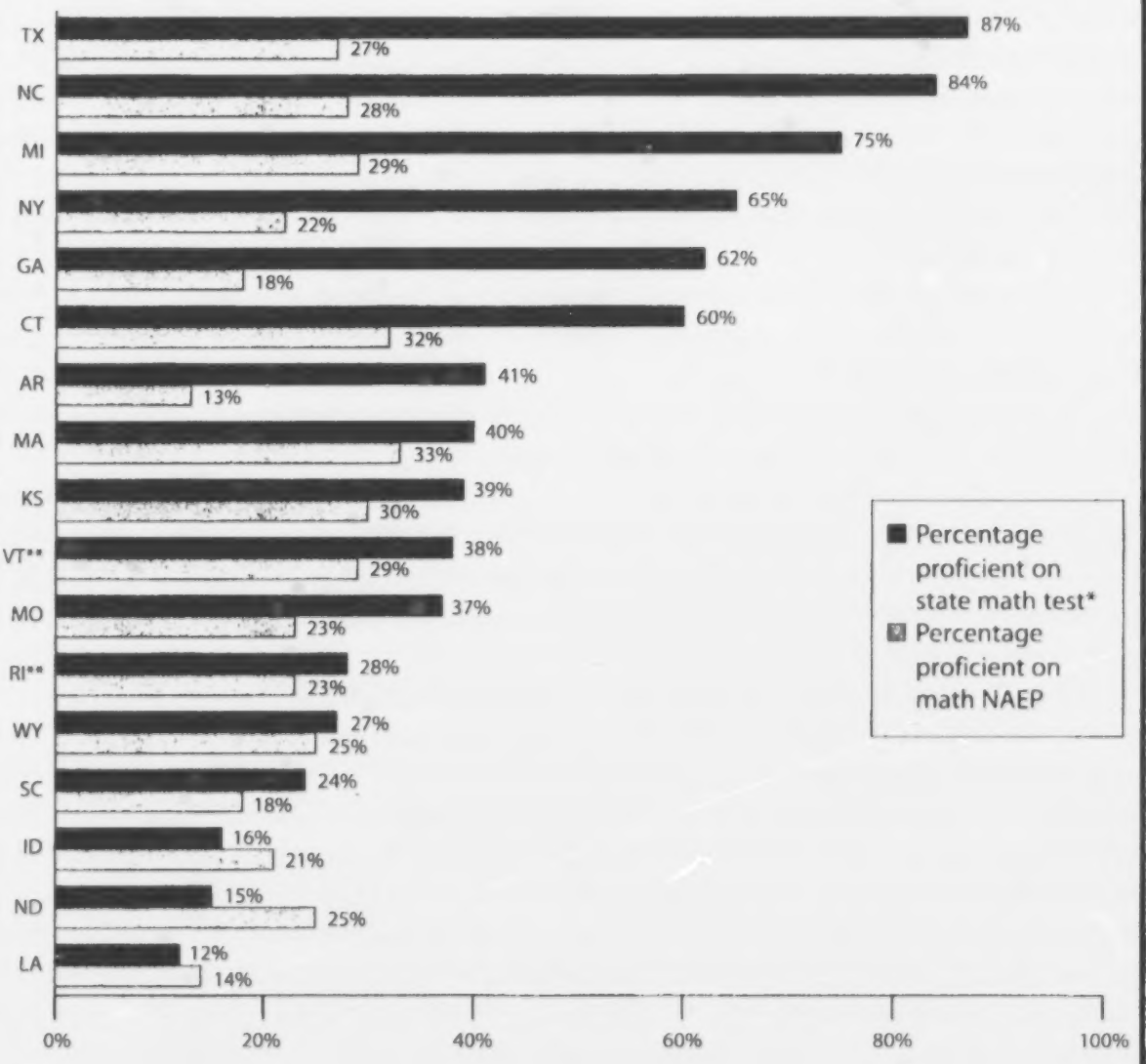
While the new law changes the context of what it means to be proficient, it does not define proficiency. That remains the purview of each state. A troubling early trend emerging from a few states is a regression away from a high proficiency bar; expectations are being lowered to make the federal mandate easier to meet. In most cases, these states had challenging expectations to start. They can argue that they would face significant disadvantages in meeting the federal law's 100-percent proficiency goal. While this may be true, it does raise serious questions about the veracity of the achievement levels states are establishing. If they aim too low, states could spend a decade pushing all their students to a plateau that fails to prepare them adequately for the challenges of college and careers.

The ease with which states move proficiency bars shows how loosely connected they are to expectations students face beyond their K–12 experience. "Proficiency" lacks a strong anchor in the real world. Until recently, the effect has been limited because stringent accountability has been limited. But the

"The ease with which states move proficiency bars shows how loosely connected they are to expectations students face beyond their K–12 experience."

States Set the Bar in Different Places

Comparing results from state 4th-grade math tests to those from the 2000 National Assessment of Educational Progress shows that states have had different levels of achievement in mind when defining proficiency.



*The results from state tests are based on the percentage of students deemed proficient in states that use that term, and the percentage meeting or exceeding state standards/goals or passing in states that do not use the term proficient.

** State gives three math tests; results shown for math concepts test only

Sources: Achieve, Inc., *Education Week*

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circumstances are changing quickly as many states apply consequences for performance for the first time, and as No Child Left Behind raises the stakes above where most states let them rest. Accountability will lose support if teachers, parents and the public are not convinced that meeting standards improves students' prospects in their next steps in life.

The anchor for proficiency should rest at the end of high school; the definition should be a simple one — readiness for the demands of the next phase of life, either in the first year of college or in a high-skill, high-growth workplace. While undoubtedly a stretch for many states, this is the most educationally and politically defensible point at which to set the bar. From there, states can work backward to chart the progression of skills and knowledge that must be reached at each lower grade to arrive at meaningful proficiency. Practically speaking, the college/career readiness benchmark is where the public probably assumes the bar already is set. Roughly seven out of 10 parents believe a college degree "has become as important as a high school diploma used to be;" three-quarters of parents say it is "certain" or "very likely" their children will attend college, according to Public Agenda.

If performing well against state standards does not help students eventually fulfill these aspirations, standards and tests quickly will lose their credibility in the public's mind. But few states have yet fully factored postsecondary readiness into their deliberations on K–12 proficiency. Higher education and the private sector have a critical role to play — both in helping shape appropriate expectations and in reinforcing the need for students to reach them. But little work has been done to link attainment of state standards with opportunities in either. One substantial push that originated at the 1996 Summit was the Making Academics Count Campaign, through which 10,000 companies agreed to consider student transcripts in hiring decisions.

In 2001, Achieve teamed with The Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the National Alliance of Business to take a closer look at the demands of higher education and high-skills jobs to help states align their high school expectations to what the real world requires. The American Diploma Project is working with five states — Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas — to help them bring their high school standards and assessments into tighter alignment with their postsecondary systems. Eventually, the project will create a set of universal proficiency benchmarks against which interested states can compare their high school exit expectations.

Light Shining into Every Dark Corner

At the heart of states' push to raise academic standards is the strong belief that, as a democracy and as an economy, the nation can ill afford to continue to have high expectations for only a chosen few children. It is both practical and desirable for schools to move away from a bell-curve approach that requires only some to reach success and toward a standards-based approach that calls for all students to cross a threshold.

This rhetoric generally has outpaced the reality in states. Standards have been set, more tests are in place, but the real demand for results in the form of accountability measures is much less present. The most prevalent form of accountability comes in the form of annual school report cards that most states now require; however, only slightly more than half the states assign ratings to the performance that is reported, and only 16 states attach significant rewards or consequences to those ratings. About a third of states break down achievement results by groupings such as race or ethnicity, English proficiency, or economic disadvantage, but very few of those states require schools to close the achievement gaps among those students. Too many students in need of extra help are lost in results averaged across entire school enrollments. In many instances, states have put in place consequences for students before adults have been held accountable.

This is another area in which No Child Left Behind will change conditions dramatically. It will require states to hold all schools accountable for raising achievement and it will focus greater attention on closing persistent achievement gaps among groups of students, both by requiring the reporting of results for each group and by demanding annual improvement by each group and attaching consequences for schools that fail to make it.

"... shining a spotlight to locate someone in distress is just the beginning of a search-and-rescue mission — those who aim to help have to reach out and finish the job."

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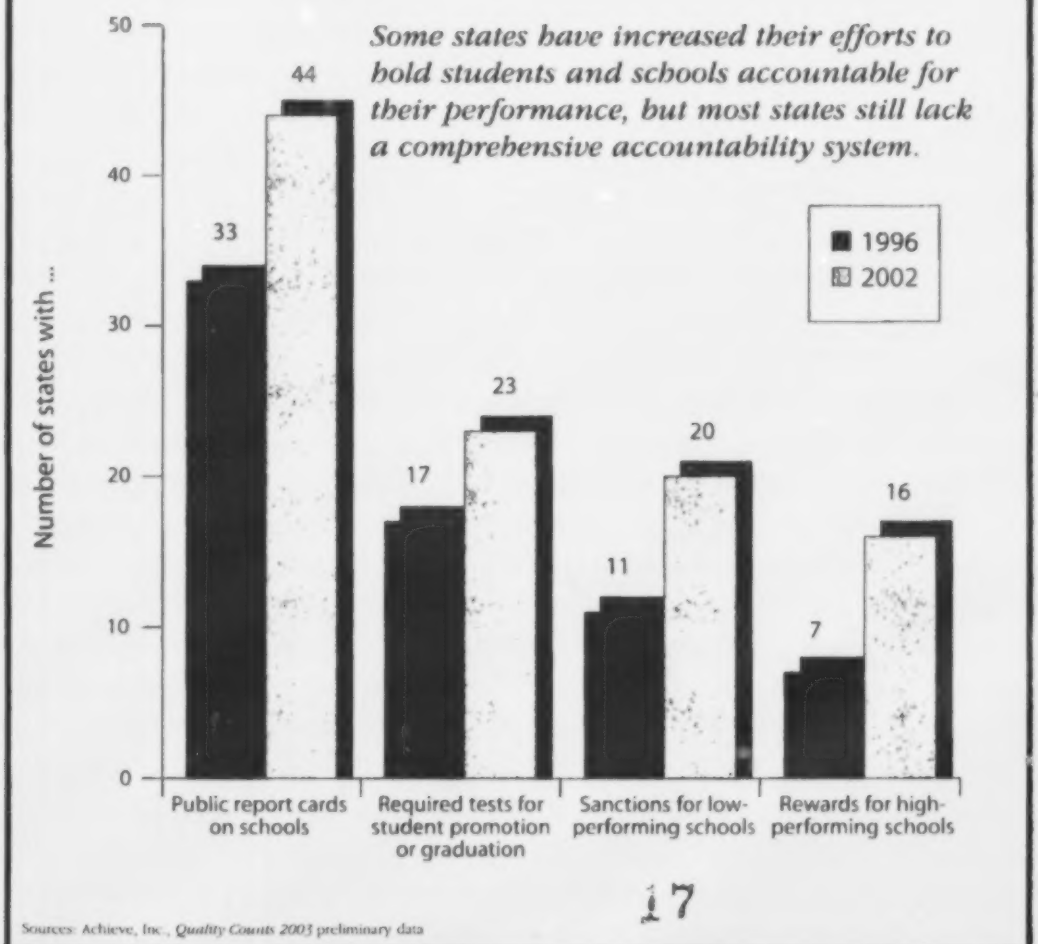
The federal law's intention is a sound one. But shining a spotlight to locate someone in distress is just the beginning of a search-and-rescue mission — those who aim to help have to reach out and finish the job.

The identification of low-performing schools creates an imperative to help those schools. Among the 30 states that rated schools as low-performing this year, 27 also provided some support to those schools. But state leaders will be the first to admit that their success at turning these schools around has been limited, and that they lack the capacity to help large numbers of low-performing schools simultaneously. Yet that is the situation most states will face if projections of the impact of No Child Left Behind's "Adequate Yearly Progress" provision hold true. It is a difficult realization given states' current budget strains, but policymakers may need to acknowledge that actually raising achievement and closing the gap will require far more in terms of effort and resources than most states and school districts have invested thus far, and it will require more than simply monitoring compliance with state regulations.

Accountability Varies from State to State



Sources: Achieve, Inc., *Quality Counts 2003* preliminary data

Teachers' Support at Risk

If states' efforts are limited to setting high standards, testing every year and levying consequences on schools that perform poorly, they may push away the most important actors in raising achievement — teachers. First and foremost, teachers want their students to succeed. They are generally very supportive of standards, but they may rebel if they believe their students are being set up by expectations rendered unreasonable by a lack of adequate supports. Second, it is human nature for people to judge any change against their perceptions of the capacity to enable it to happen. In the case of higher standards, some teachers question if every school — or their own school in particular — has that capacity. To date, states have not done enough to ease teachers' concerns in either regard. It is not surprising, then, that teacher support for standards, testing and accountability is not as strong as it once was. Support fell from 73 percent to 55 percent over two years, according to polls of American Federation of Teachers' members.

Teachers find states' attention to two central aspects of their professional lives sorely lacking. The first is the teaching tools necessary to translate standards into rich, challenging instruction. The second is the professional development to allow them to use the tools to their greatest effect.

Even the best set of standards is not specific enough to guide instruction. With greater expectations for students and accountability for performance emerging, teachers are asking for more specific guidance on what to teach to help students reach standards. This is particularly true for new teachers. But many states traditionally have been loath to wade into curriculum development in deference to local school districts.

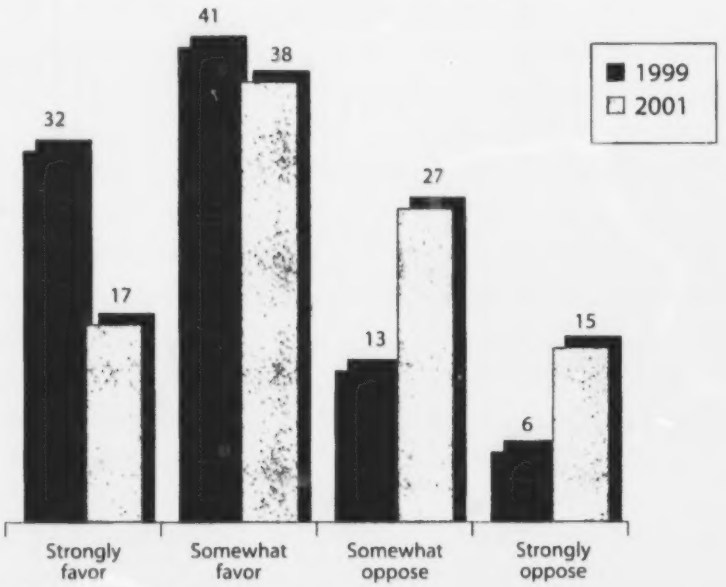
What has become clearer as states have applied common standards is that all but a handful of school districts lack either the resources or the expertise to craft coherent curricula that will lift students to high standards. For this reason, states' traditional hands-off policy will not suffice. Based on their unique contexts, states must find ways to ensure access to a high-quality curriculum in every school. Beyond establishing mandatory curricula, states have a range of options — from a voluntary curriculum that is the default choice in the absence of a locally grown alternative to more sophisticated ways to identify and share the best examples of locally developed curricula.

In contrast to the availability of standards-based curricula, teacher professional development occurs in relative abundance. One recent study of five urban school districts spread across the country found they devoted an average of 3 percent of their annual budgets to professional development, about $3,600 per teacher. This falls short of the 10 percent target suggested by the National Staff Development Council, but it is a substantial starting point. The study concludes that the five urban districts studied had no overarching strategy for focusing and integrating professional development resources around

"Teachers are the primary agents charged with ensuring that students achieve standards. No reforms a state enacts can succeed without them."

Teachers' Views

The American Federation of Teachers, which as an organization has strongly supported raising standards, has seen support for standards-based reform among its members slipping.



Sources: Albert Shanker Institute, American Federation of Teachers

improving student achievement. While more resources may, in fact, be needed, what is available today is spent with little quality control.

The long-held practice of making professional development the domain of local school systems needs to give way in a world in which academic expectations and accountability are being managed by states. While many decisions and a large percentage of the resources will continue to come from the local level, states should exert greater influence to ensure that teachers receive higher-quality professional development. Measures may include creating a better system for tracking professional development spending across districts and across all programs aimed at improving student performance, monitoring the effectiveness of professional development efforts based on student results, and allocating state dollars only to local efforts that can demonstrate a clear connection to standards.

As Achieve co-chair, Louis V. Gerstner, Jr., chairman of IBM, told leaders attending the 1999 Summit, it would be hard to argue against any increased investment in the quality of teaching because anything else spent on schools would be compromised without better instruction. Teachers are the primary agents charged with ensuring that students achieve standards. No reforms a state enacts can succeed without them.

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Summing Up

When governors and business leaders envisioned an organization like Achieve at the 1996 Summit, the question was whether states — and by extension, the United States — should commit to using standards as the lever to lift the performance of every school and every student. That issue has been decided. The question today is whether there is the public will in each state to see these reforms through.

There should be no doubt that the public firmly supports using common, challenging standards to raise student achievement, measuring results, and holding schools and students accountable for performance. Polls taken over the last five years consistently make clear that the public agrees that states have the proper strategy. But this support cannot be taken for granted. If standards are seen as disconnected from real-world demands and tests are seen as instruments to criticize rather than help schools and students, the public will abandon reform.

What today is called the "standards movement" is still young. The states that have been raising standards the longest have been engaged in those efforts for only about 10 years. Even in these states, widespread shifts in teaching and learning have appeared only in the last two or three years. In many states, reforms have come in the last five years and are essentially brand new in classrooms.

The record of states with the longest experience shows that progress is being made, mainly in the elementary grades. But there is much more to

"States must complete the work by strengthening their standards and assessments and by ensuring that students and teachers have the support they need to do their jobs well."

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be done and much more to be learned. States must complete the work by strengthening their standards and assessments and by ensuring that students and teachers have the support they need to do their jobs well.

Acknowledging that the work is incomplete is no admission that it is ill conceived or impossible to achieve. If anything, the steadily growing line of states turning to standards, assessment and accountability over the last five years testifies to the power of the ideas behind these reforms. But ideas alone will not improve schools.

With nearly every state in line and a new federal law mandating every state to act, it would be easy and convenient to assume mistakenly that standards-based reform will proceed on a steady course. Actually, the opportunities states now have to advance education reform provoke tough choices. It remains to be seen how states will respond.

Leaders in state government, business and education must redouble their efforts and extend their vigilance to see the choices made well. Now that the nation has seen through the facade covering the common school ideal, it must step up to the challenges of replacing differing expectations for children with high standards for all.

Achieve's Work in 2002

Achieve offered vital support to states interested in raising the quality of their standards, tests and accountability systems and continued to serve as a leading national voice on improving schools. Highlights of that work follow.

- Maryland, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Oregon and Tennessee each sought appraisals of their standards, tests or both from Achieve's Benchmarking Initiative. Achieve now has benchmarked standards and tests in more than a quarter of the states.
  Oklahoma also asked Achieve to conduct a broader examination of its education reform policies. In addition, Maryland and Texas released policy reviews that Achieve began in 2001.

- Achieve's *Mathematics Achievement Partnership* (MAP), which works with states to transform the teaching and testing of middle-grades math, began work on professional development modules that harness the power of video and Web technology to show teachers how to teach to rigorous standards. The partnership also developed a "proto-test" to guide the development of a common, 8th-grade assessment aligned to Foundations for Success, the world-class academic expectations MAP published in 2001.
  MAP was awarded a $250,000 grant from the National Science Foundation to allow Achieve to work in-depth with a group of states on laying the groundwork to implement more rigorous math standards.

- The *American Diploma Project*, Achieve's joint effort with The Education Trust, the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation and the National Alliance of Business, is working to close the gap between high school exit expectations and the real demands of college and high-skills workplaces. The project began with intensive work with leaders in its five partner states — Indiana, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Nevada and Texas — to identify and address state-specific gaps between K–12 standards and tests and postsecondary academic demands. The project also conducted a national study of the nature of the academic skills needed in high-skills workplaces.

- In conjunction with the Albert Shanker Institute, Achieve's *Public Leadership Initiative* organized a national leadership forum exploring the gap between state standards and tests and the curriculum and professional development available to most teachers. More than 125 state government, business and education leaders attended the two-day forum, which showcased the work of both experts and leading practitioners.
  Achieve also published the latest in its series of policy briefs, which focused on issues states should weigh in responding to the federal No Child Left Behind Act.

- Achieve board members and staff continued to be frequent sources for journalists and others seeking to understand standards, testing and accountability. Achieve officials were quoted in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Los Angeles Times*. Board members Louis V. Gerstner Jr. of IBM and Craig Barrett of Intel had opinion pieces published in the *New York Times* and *Baltimore Sun*, respectively. Achieve president Robert Schwartz and executive vice president Matthew Gandal penned a commentary for the *Washington Post*. *USA Today* gave Achieve's math partnership a strong editorial endorsement

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